

## Duxbury Neighborhoods

### Alden Heights

#### A Kinder, Gentler Neighborhood

By The Rev. Cannon Robert Merry

Duxbury was probably founded by a group of farmers who left Plymouth and sought their livelihood in agriculture in the relatively flat meadowlands and smooth marshes of adjoining Duxbury. It was only years later that they turned to fishing, since their first necessity was to grow crops for food. After the division of land by lot in 1627 with the assignment of 20 acres per individual per family and guaranteed water transport access, these farms probably reached far west back from the shore of Kingston Bay beginning at the Jones River estuary and extending down to and including Standish Shore, then called

almost no spare ground for lawn or garage. What would they do after all with a garage since at the time of its origin these people didn't own either a car or a horse?

The Heights was built for the "All American" family at the time, not for the movers and shakers but the workers -- the blue-collar workers, and Duxbury wanted and needed them. It is remarkable that in these days when the entire town (and I speak from some personal knowledge) was catering to the wealthy and alleged wealthy, all seeking the crumbs that might fall from their tables. (After all, we townies had to make enough money in 2 summer months to last us the other 10, no small achievement.) There was one section of town where people were just people trying to escape the heat and smoke and dust of the city and this at a modest cost. This was to be a part of town where rivalries in size of

from his native Latvia when the Russians took over the country from the Germans. After spending 5 years in a detention camp in Bavaria, then occupied by French forces, The First Parish Church of Duxbury sponsored them and they came to America. As a carpenter, he could settle here easily, and my father among others found work for him. He saved his money and his wife went to work in domestic service, so they were able to buy this house and an acre of ground for a garden and a chicken yard a few yards away. I probed into their experiences in the camp and one that struck me was their practice of taking coffee that had been issued to them and walking out over the countryside to the farms to get bread and milk for their small children. Mr. Berzins took me out to show me the garage he had rebuilt and the garden and chickens in his yard, and I thought how great it is to know this story and the life style that is being carried on here in Duxbury.



The Berzins home, Alden Heights

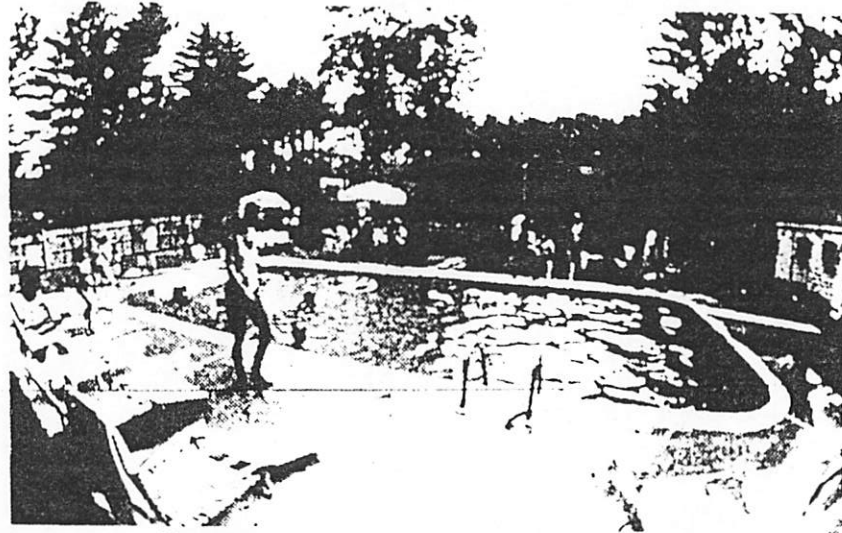
"The Nook." It reached north beyond what we now call Hall's Corner, centering its commercial, religious and social life around the First Meeting House grounds next to what we now call "The Old Burial Ground," the oldest cemetery in continuous use in the country. The whole area, including the marsh and shore below, was for many years known as "Morton's Hole." Land west of Tremont St., was called "Common Lands," and used as a back-up for town fundings.

The Alden Heights area from Island Creek to Morton's Hole was owned by a few of these early farmers, most of it by Christopher Wadsworth. Other owners, according to Dorothy Wentworth in her *Settlement and Growth of Duxbury*, were Ephraim Hicks, Constant Starr and Thomas Prentice. Three of them were ministers: Charles Turner, John Robinson and Zedekiah Singer. *Duxbury Clipper*

lawns or numbers of servants or length of "stretch limos" did not enter into the life style.

I have always had a warm spot in my heart for Alden Heights dating from my college summers driving my father's milk truck from his dairy farm on North Hill. People here consumed a great quantity of milk; with families of 4 and more children the usual order was 5 or 6 quarts. People in most other parts of town had standing orders for 2 quarts of milk and a jar of cream and I had to bill them once a month, a real nuisance. Alden Heights' people paid cash every day. The price as I recall was 21 cents a quart, and with our chief competitor just down the road at Bay Farm at 24 cents a quart, I had a real edge on the business here.

I was reminded of basic American values when I visited the Heights 3 weeks ago. I wanted to visit



Alden Heights neighborhood picnic, July '88, at the Arnold's.

So I leave this report on Alden Heights with a great deal of satisfaction. Duxbury is a lovely place to live and we are all willing to pay the cost of the privileges the town affords, but there is one great problem, namely, the cost. People who can afford to live here will pay the price, but many, especially native Duxburyites living on retirement incomes, cannot afford it. Every so often I hear of a substantial citizen who has moved away because of the high cost of living here. I found in Alden Heights one place in town where living can be at modest cost and my feeling is that we owe the people living here a debt of gratitude. It is a kindness that we can use in these expensive times. Meanwhile, take a drive up here and see all the new construction, the neat lawns and yards and know that here is a neighborhood of mutually caring, independent and self-reliant folks who do their share and more to set forward the quality of life we cherish.



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Shipbuilding pretty well took over the town from these early 1800's to the latter half of this century. The shore line of the bay below Alden Heights was claimed by boatyards and indeed brick kilns, since home building was an accompaniment of the prosperity of this period. A fish pier and what used to be called a "Pogie" factory and later a shellfish collection point continued right down to my own day in the early 1920's.

After the shipbuilding era Duxbury struggled with some cottage industries to keep food on the table, but times were hard until the town was discovered as a summer resort. At the turn of the century big old prestigious houses became inns and family homes opened spare rooms to boarders and a new kind of prosperity gradually dawned. People of some means began to buy property and summer visitors swelled the ranks of the year-round population from roughly 1,000 to 5,000. It was about this time that Alden Heights was discovered as a desirable summer residence. 1/8-acre lots were laid out and people of modest incomes began to move in. Mary Ann Hannigan says her father built the first summer cottage in 1908. Many others followed, most on 1/8-acre lots. The town fathers at the time felt some kind of compulsion to set this hill apart and for a time it was called and still is by some oldtimers "Alden Heights Park." Perhaps there was a deliberate effort to build affordable summer homes, or maybe it was just another development for profit. In any case, Duxbury did boast a neighborhood that people from South Boston, Somerville and Saugus could afford to rent and perhaps buy into. As I recall Duxbury's summer people, Powder Point, Washington St. (and connecting lanes) were occupied by those who came from Brookline, the Newtons and Cambridge; Standish Shore was owned by people mostly from Rockland, Abington, Whitman and Brockton. There seemed to be a lesser and lesser affluent constituency as we moved farther and farther from the bay. There was also a greater desire to live on or near Duxbury Bay, which gave Alden Heights people a real advantage. The houses in the more affluent sections of town had for the most part at least an acre of ground around them, where as those in Alden Heights had

milk; with families of 4 and more children the usual order was 5 or 6 quarts. People in most other parts of town had standing orders for 2 quarts of milk and a jar of cream and I had to bill them once a month, a real nuisance. Alden Heights' people paid cash every day. The price as I recall was 21 cents a quart, and with our chief competitor just down the road at Bay Farm at 24 cents a quart, I had a real edge on the business here.

I was reminded of basic American values when I visited the Heights 3 weeks ago. I wanted to walk around, visit the homes and get a real feel of the place. I couldn't help noticing that most of the roads were gravel. On inquiry I discovered that this was because the town officials still look upon Alden Heights as a private preserve, thus town tax money is not available for black-topping. The same goes for plowing; no town snow plows come here despite the fact that all residents are tax-paying citizens. The crushed stone on wheel tracks I drove over I was told was bought and applied by the people themselves. And most of them like it this way. They like the hidden aspect of this neighborhood. On my several drives around the area I noticed an abundance of new looking houses. I was told that almost all of them are now winterized, people doing most of the work themselves. On my last call I had to wend my way around maintenance vehicles. It is indeed a boom area with line men stringing wires for cable tv and carpenters reshingling a house. When I stopped to check out some of these things with Erik Kusins, proprietor of DEK Engineering, he told me there are at least 11 "new" houses (i.e. renovated) in the past 3 years. He boasted of the area's "do it yourself" philosophy as he in fact had done most of the work on his own renovation during which he tore down a cottage and a garage to give him space for new construction. I was so intrigued by his report I had to go and see it for myself. Janet, his wife, who works full time at Rockland Trust, showed me around during her lunch hour. I was struck by 2 things, the buxom wood-burning stove in the living room and the ceiling fan with a 4-bulb light. The major heat source for the house is gas-fired forced hot water with the furnace in the half cellar. They are rearing 2 children, ages 9 and 11, and with 2 full-time jobs they are able to keep their heads above water.

I made an earlier visit to Pat Arnold's house, which had been extensively renovated. By putting together 3 1/8-acre lots plus their own original space they have been able to place a swimming pool at the far end of their lot. I noted also a substantial boat owned by a neighbor which I also have seen regularly at Howland's Landing. All in all, the lifestyle of these 2 families would be an example for all Americans to follow.

My most overwhelming visit was with the Berzins family. Pat Arnold had told me how Mr. Berzins typified the indomitable and independent spirit of the Heights, having lived there year-round for longer than most. I discovered as he unfolded his story that he and his wife and 5 children had come to the U.S.A. in 1950, having escaped after World War II

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